

# THEATRICAL GAME-PLAY: GIORGIO MANGANELLI'S *OTELLO: OVVERO CASSIO* GOVERNA A CIPRO

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## Sommario

*Si analizza lo scritto manganelliano, Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro (1977), in relazione alla teoria dell' intertestualità formulata dalla filosofa francese, Julia Kristeva, che definisce il testo come una raccolta polifonica di voci narranti. Manganelli, in questa opera 'teatrale', mette in pratica tale concetto come tramite per distruggere il disegno formale dell'Otello shakesperiano.*

Revisiting the work of a highly innovative, but niche writer, two decades after his death, is always a complex exercise. His work, already influential in his day, has grown in prestige in the years following his death in 1990. Many new publications of his large collection of unpublished works saw release to critical acclaim, while his influence as a writer grew proportionately to the numbers of new critical volumes in the many different areas of his vast literary production. Considered by critics to be a writer of unwavering innovation, his work is still considered worthy of note.

Manganelli, Milanese by birth but a resident of Rome<sup>1</sup> for most of his adult life, and his vast *oeuvre* – which became ever more difficult reading for the non-literary specialist (“[...] he has had the reputation of being indescribably difficult to read and essentially meant for the specialist in the field”<sup>2</sup>, Scarlini, 2005:IX) – critically engaged the

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<sup>1</sup> Rome, as a predominantly Baroque city, is important as a backdrop to the stylistic and linguistic richness of Manganelli's own baroque writing style.

<sup>2</sup> “[...] per molto tempo ha avuto reputazione di essere difficile oltre ogni dire e per [...] l'addetto ai lavori”. Unless otherwise stated all translations are the author's own.

Italian literary *status quo* while raising thorny issues with regards to reader engagement and patterns of commercial exchange<sup>3</sup>. A founding member of *Gruppo '63*, the literary group described by Linda Hutcheon as the “closest non-French relative to the radical writers [...] around the journal *Tel Quel*” (1977:199), Manganelli’s writing was highly innovative even when compared to the writers of the Italian *avanguardia*.

The loosely affiliated literary *Gruppo '63*, and Manganelli in particular, addressed the deep rooted dissatisfaction with traditional literature in the late Sixties and early Seventies with suggestions of ‘reform’ on a number of planes; content, linguistic codex, narrative forms and compositional devices. Thus, a broad based engagement in varied aspects of literary reform, not really identifiable in a single work or period or author, is the programmatic guideline to these authors’ formulation of artistic intent: their main focus being on the fracture and re-assemblage of the text, as well as the rejection of the traditional plot driven narrative form, tainted by the realist stamp and mainly associated with the years of Neorealism. In an article written for the literary journal *Il Verri* in 1967, Manganelli states his expectations of literature, as well as theatre, as “a system of uncertainties, irritations and imprecise undertakings”<sup>4</sup> (Scarlini, 2005:XXII) in which the ironic, playful revisionism of traditional writing is the main message and programme, and which he would follow during the course of his writing career.

*Gruppo '63* and Manganelli’s experimental writing were innovative in Italy but also in tune with other important trends in the rest of Europe. Manganelli’s focus on the text moved the emphasis away from story-telling as well as the content based literature of the post-war years. His texts were no longer easily defined as ‘novels’ or ‘prose’ and pushed the engagement with ‘game’ to the extreme. Mainly in line with Kristeva’s ideas on “intertextuality” – first used in her volume, *Desire in Language* in 1966, which introduced Mikhail Bakhtin’s “dialogic” prose to the West – as a “permutation of texts”

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<sup>3</sup> Although appreciated by a very small minority of dedicated readers, the release of his books was always planned for the pre-Christmas commercial season, during which they sold in vast numbers.

<sup>4</sup> “un sistema di diffidenze, irritazioni e imprese imprecise”.

within the individual text (Kristeva, 1980:36), Manganelli's *cosmo parola* (word universe) also posited literature as a 'process'. This Kristevian notion of "the text [...] as a productivity" (Kristeva,1980:36) is picked up in Manganelli's approach to the text as a continuing whole, a gradual accumulative both endless and self-renewing, where the 'book' is a portion of text that enjoys temporary suspension within the 'allplaceness' and 'alltimeness' of the artistic creation:

Therefore there is no beginning and no end: but an impersonal design; a heraldic symbol, the plan of an artificial construct, or of a minutely fashioned organic machine.<sup>5</sup> (*Nuovo Commento*, 1969:80)

Each literary moment recalls a previous moment that is itself an elaboration of another archetype, the text always representing an accumulation of pluralities:

A text is something unique and unrepeatable, and also contains an infinite number of other texts. It offers the reader a series of traces that can be developed in many different directions. In this sense every literary work is a thriller whose solution is always 'elsewhere', within the ambit of the devotion of each reader cum investigator.<sup>6</sup> (*Pinocchio: Un libro parallelo*, 2002: book flap)

Thus, Manganelli's text is at the same time both the Ur-text itself as well as in search of it. Much like Borges' book in 'The Library of Babel', Manganelli's "*cosmo parola/word cosmos*" is similar to "[...] a great circular book, whose spine is continuous and which follows the complete circle of the walls" (Borges, 1970:79), existing around

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<sup>5</sup> "Dunque, non v'è inizio, non conclusione: ma sí disegno impersonale; stemma; mappa di un corpo artificiale, una macchina minutamente organica."

<sup>6</sup> "Un testo è qualcosa di unico e di irripetibile, ma contiene anche infiniti altri testi. Offre una serie di tracce che possono essere sviluppate in molte direzioni. In questo senso, ogni opera letteraria è un 'giallo' la cui soluzione è sempre 'altrove', nella capacità di devozione del lettore investigatore."

the reader as a continuing presence. Such a book also requires a different process of reading, one that is understood as immersion rather than linearity:

A book is not read, it is dived into; it is always around us. When we are in one of the infinite centres of the book we realize that not only is the book without end, but it is also unique. No other book exists. All other books are hidden and revealing in this aspect. In all books reside all other books. In every word are to be found all words; in every book, all words; in every word, all books. Therefore this “parallel book” sits neither alongside, nor on the margins, nor in the centre, but within, like all books, since in fact there is no book that is not parallel.<sup>7</sup>  
(*Pinocchio: Un libro parallelo*, 2002:10)

Just as all books, for Manganelli, are one book, so every literary tradition, and with it all other texts, are a data bank from which to draw allusions and references and with which to engage in the creation of the alternative text. One of the roles of the author is therefore the plundering of the store of existing literature which is seen as an archive. In his collection of 100 short stories, *Centuria* (1979), Manganelli describes his own books as “a vast and amenable library”<sup>8</sup> (book flap) in which the redefinition of the text as a library, of course, takes the book into another realm: the book as knowledge rather than entertainment or information. The “cosmo parola/word universe” is therefore an epistemological certainty that resides in the accumulation of texts and the predominance of language.

A reader of refined taste and enormously wide ranging reading interests, Manganelli freely draws from a pre-existing pool of literary

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<sup>7</sup> “Un libro non si legge; vi si precipita; esso sta, in ogni momento, attorno a noi. Quando siamo non già nel centro ma in uno degli infiniti centri del libro, ci accorgiamo che il libro non solo è illimitato, ma è unico. Non esistono altri libri; tutti gli altri libri sono nascosti e rivelanti in questo. In tutti i libri stanno tutti gli altri libri; in ogni parola tutte le parole; in ogni libro, tutte le parole; in ogni parola, tutti i libri. Dunque questo “libro parallelo” non sta né accanto, né in margine, né in calce; sta “dentro”, come tutti i libri, giacché non v’è libro che non sia parallelo.”

<sup>8</sup> “una vasta ed amena biblioteca”.

production as a starting point for a process of rewriting that posits dismemberment of the original as an essential part of the creative process. Focusing on the process of writing, rather than on the product, Manganelli's text exemplifies the Kristevian notion of the text itself as a "permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, [in which] several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (Kristeva:36), drawing together diverse voices to create a totality ("The *novel*, seen as a text, is a semiotic practice in which the synthesized patterns of several utterances can be read" (Kristeva, 1980:37)).

In a very similar vein, Eco theorizes on the critically important notion of the open text, which is defined as an "open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterated specificity" (Eco, 1984:49), thereby clearly underlining the text as the multifaceted source for interpretative possibilities. According to Umberto Eco, the open text "instills a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art" (original italics, 1984:65), an approach which combines both the reading (contemplation) and active creation of writing (utilization) that underlies the idea of reusing a text. So, while the 'author' may not yet be completely dead as attested by Barthes's famous line, he can be said to live in an altered form, that of manipulator of the reused. Manganelli, as "librarian of the possible"<sup>9</sup>, is the epicenter of a process of accumulation, in which the original text becomes a *spunto* or starting point that allows for the radiating strands of reading. Again, Manganelli's *Otello* makes concrete this notion of the open text by literally opening the Shakespearean play before the reader and extending the possibilities of the original text into myriad new formulations. For Manganelli, therefore, intertextual referencing is the structuring foundation of his entire *oeuvre* and in this example of a rewritten work, *Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*, he gives an almost programmatic example of the understanding of this process.

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<sup>9</sup> The title of the unpublished doctoral thesis written by the author of this article in 1990.

Manganelli's foray into 'theatre', collectively reprinted as "tragedies to be read"<sup>10</sup> in 2005, is the epitome of his ironic representation of the borrowed text, in this case traditional theatre. At their very inception, his 'plays' are subversions of the notion of the *genre* of theatre. These are 'plays' that are impossible to produce for a live audience being either extended dialogues – as in the case of the rewriting of *Hamlet* turned into the pastiche 'High Tea' or in the case of *Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*, into an extended string of monologues. These 'plays' are, in fact, more novelistic renditions than theatrical exchanges. Having himself come into theatrical writing from the angle of review, translation and criticism, rather than live production (Scarlini: XIV), it is hardly surprising to see that Manganelli's version of the play is essentially in the form of a textual dialogue. In this 'theatrical' text Manganelli cuts across *genre*, conflating the play with the novel and concretizing, in 'visual' form, the multiplicity of voices inherent in the Kristevian definition of the novel.

Also partaking of the impulse towards "a conscious disregard or 'deconstruction' of Shakespearian theatrical production, which was initiated by the so called 'director's theatre' in the mid-1960s" (Draudt, 2005:299), these Manganellian theatrical exchanges challenge the original Shakespearean production from within the play itself, juxtaposing the new 'play' as a subversive dismemberment of the original's essential traits. If a play cannot be produced on stage then the subversion affects the *genre* of theatre as well as the work itself, with the resultant focus being turned from 'performance', which is expected of theatre, to the process of text creation itself. So what the 'audience' hears in this 'performance' is the Kristevian text's 'productivity' with its 'redistributive (destructive/constructive)' "relationship to the language within which it is situated" (Kristeva:36).

In this rewriting of *Othello*, the co-existence of the two texts, the original play *Othello* and the rewritten play, *Otello: Ovvero Cassio*

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<sup>10</sup> Scarlini, L. (ed.), 2005, *Tragedie da leggere* covers all Manganelli's theatrical productions in great detail and brings the historical background information on productions and radio presentations to add depth and richness to this neglected aspect of Manganelli's artistic production.

*governa a Cipro*, is in itself the rendition of the process of writing, the 'memory' of the Shakespearean text literally appearing within the process of creation of the new text, the Manganellian *Otello*. Past voices of the former text, concretized within the rewriting, blend the layers within a single new work. Even the formal aspects of theatre are redefined in an alternative form, with 'stage directions' actually becoming explanatory notes in which the author directs the reader's attention to the fictionality of the process.

Voice fades away; the lights come on; Jago proceeds to the centre of the stage; he turns to address the audience in a moderate discursive tone, even to a certain extent annotations, just like one who knows exactly what he should be explaining [...].<sup>11</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 196)

Unlike in the original play, in which the motives revolve around psychological portraits of human personality traits, Manganelli's version focuses on the text's important manipulation of words, and therefore the exposure of the essential nature of language in its fundamental quality of 'lie' which, along with the use of 'falsehood' as literary strategy, determines the poetics of Manganelli's text.

To lie, signor, to lie till dying of it. To be born in an agony of lies, lie through a life, to love, unlove, loving through lies, lying for life, lying to blood, lying to death, dying while lying.<sup>12</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: book flap)

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<sup>11</sup> "Voce che si spegne; si accendono le luci; Jago – avanza in mezzo alla scena; si rivolge al pubblico con tono pacato, discorsivo, anche talora didascalico, come di chi sappia del tutto ciò che dovrebbe spiegare."

<sup>12</sup> "Ma 'mentire' signore, 'mentire' fino a morire. Nascere in un'agonia di menzogne, mentire una vita, amare, disamare amati mentendo, mentire a vita, mentire a sangue, mentire a morte, morti mentire."

The alternatives of the hypothetical text develop from within the text and gain formulation as it proceeds through the motions of rewriting. Each definition of ‘love’ and ‘die’ in the passage above could spawn a new discourse on love and dying, each shifting into new meanings and new literary portrayals. This is not a play that concerns itself with the semblance of reality in the perusal of the characters’ psychological interaction but rather with the definition of literary possibilities within the text itself, totally and obsessively, meta-fictional in nature:

I am certain that in this story you will see famous and desperate people, people who speak, who chat, who sing of love hurl themselves towards death, when everything could be avoided with a few calmly stated words; but those words will never be uttered, and not because I am here to stop them from being said [...].<sup>13</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 200)

So, while Manganelli maintains the spirit of the original text – its content and ‘message’ is preserved – the work is a bank of raw material to be subdivided and manipulated into varying patterns of potentiality. The famous original is used as a point of departure for elaborations that should be read (rather than heard or experienced in a theatre) and posited as a glossary that adds to the skeleton of the original work’s theme.

In fact, each monologue can be seen as the nucleus of an alternative text. In a network of allusions, the focus of the reader's interest must perforce fall on the derivation and the potentiality of other ‘possible’ texts. While appearing to be a direct derivative, this ‘play’ is using the original as a vantage point for the reader, elaborating on both the nature of the play as well as the modality of the theatre itself. Jago’s original jealousy, his genius for the negative motivation of plot and emotion is the nucleus of the alternative text,

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<sup>13</sup> In questa storia sono certo che vedrete persone illustre e disperate; gente che parla, che chiacchera, che canta d’amore e si precipita alla morte, quando tutto sarebbe evitabile con due parole dette con calma; ma quelle parole non saranno mai dette, e non perché ci sia io ad impedirlo, [...].



postulating other interpretations and other possible directions for the play.

Note that in these machinations, I am the distributor of animosities, like my lord names the warriors, so I name the “enemies” and they are always “sick”.<sup>14</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 30-31)

While in the Shakespeare version Cassius is a secondary pawn that counterbalances the tragic Othello, in Manganelli the character Cassio becomes pivotal, the title player in a displaced dramatic charade of which only the author is the controlling genius, because as with the text itself, the important point is its outcome:

There will be much to be said about Cassio as, in a sense the story originates there; but this is also simply a phrase, Cassio didn't know that, will never know anything.<sup>15</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 12-13)

The characters are puppets in the hands of the author. Just as the story is determined by the words in which it is couched, the emotions portrayed are totally reliant on the play on words that formalises them:

Non chiacchero molto, mi piacciono le battute profonde, che nemmeno io capisco. (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 14)

Relatively little interaction happens between the characters. Sections taken verbatim from Shakespeare's play are followed by extended and complex monologues that intricately dissect the action and motivation of the original characters. By addressing the audience directly the

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<sup>14</sup> Notate che io in questa macchinazione, sono il distributore delle inimicizie, come il Signore nomina i cavalieri, io nomino i “nemici”, ed essi sempre, sono “infermi”.

<sup>15</sup> Di Cassio ci sarà molto da dire, perché, in certo senso, la storia parte da lí; ma anche questo è un modo di dire, Cassio non lo sapeva, non saprà mai nulla.

author not only plays with the conventions of theatre but also with those of the audience who also, as readers, become part of the production of the play. In the following quote, not only has the issue of Jago's motivation from the Shakespeare play been considered (is Jago in love with Desdemona?) but the audience's reaction to the possibility is also taken into consideration.

You think that I am in love with the girl? Desdemona – that is her name. A funny name but you will read about her in the newspapers. She has a splendidly catastrophic future. Desdemona is beautiful, of the Venetian type, refined, she plays music and embroiders, but I am really not in love with her. I certainly admire her, she saddens me a bit, but also irritates me, she excites me, she frightens me. I envy the Moor, I pity him, I go back to envying him.<sup>16</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero Cassio governa a Cipro*: 197)

The voice of the original play has become yet another presence in the new play, the network of all the other voices that could create a link with the previous play and complete the formerly incomplete discourse. The enigma of Shakespeare's play, the motivation that leads Jago to his actions, is included in the new play's postulating dialogue. Do we believe this rather fulsome explanation from the baddie? Whatever we may think of the character, the audience, who is actually the reader, is being asked to form a picture of the figure of Jago that goes far beyond the enigma created by Shakespeare:

I like to listen, my speech is dirty, but I am not litigious, nor am I violent; I like to imagine myself as a grumpy Figaro; but like him I have the patient and taciturn manner of one who wants to witness death – whose?

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<sup>16</sup> Voi pensate che io sia innamorato della ragazza? Desdemona – si chiama così, quella ragazza, un nome buffo, ma lo leggerete sui giornali, ha un avvenire splendidamente catastrofico – Desdemona è bella, sul genere veneziano, distinta, sa far musica e ricamo, ma innamorato non lo sono davvero; certo la ammiro, un po' mi aduggia, ma infastidisce, mi eccita, mi spaventa, invidia il Moro, lo compiangio, torno ad invidiarlo.

Who knows, it isn't easy to say.<sup>17</sup> (*Otello: Ovvero  
Cassio governa a Cipro*: 198)

Of course, if we are witnessing *Othello* in the 1970s, it is easy to say who the victim will be and Desdemona's death is a spectacle that the audience expects to see as an integral part of the story of *Othello*. If *Othello* the play loses Desdemona as victim the implications are of course quite serious. Yet, it is actually possible for a new text to dispense with the death of Desdemona. The possibility is there in the rewriting and the alternative text may entertain such a possibility.

The reader is invited to make a comparison that bridges the gap between the two works with ironic revisionism. Within the parodic method is to be found the notion of form as a starting point from which the original work is both emulated and subverted, subversion being equated with both the destruction of the model as well as the homage being paid to its fundamental principles. According to Linda Hutcheon, the "mutual dependence of parody and parodied texts" in which "[i]ts two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; [but] work together, while remaining distinct in their defining differences" (*A Theory*: xiv).

The ironic distance that questions the veracity of the events of the established classic postulates an alternative end that directly underlines the nature of writing in general. By "encoding the fictiveness of [his] world[s] directly into [his] text[s]" (Hutcheon, 1987:3), the author dismantles the 'reality' of the original as well as the rewriting. The retroactive meta-fictionality of Manganelli's rewriting is a fundamental enactment of a postmodern subversive ironic distancing. All experience, like all other texts, is reduced to the enactment of language upon the framework of the written page. However, while drawing attention to the mechanism of his own meta-fictional rewriting, Manganelli also disrupts the reader's 'belief' in the dramatic integrity and 'make believe' of the original. Both the original work and the rewriting are thus clearly shown up as literary

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<sup>17</sup> Mi piace ascoltare, la mia parlata è sporca, ma non sono un litigioso, e nemmeno un violento; mi piace immaginarmi di essere un Figaro di malumore; ma ho con lui il gesto paziente e tatturo di colui che vuol veder morire – chi? Mah, non è facile dirlo.

constructs, the original relying on a semblance of veracity towards the emotional situation it creates, the second relying on the reader's familiarity with the first. In this manner the second work assumes an important bias that is alien to the original version. Manganelli presents this work as "both *interpretation* and *performance*" (original italics, Eco, 1984:49), giving the reader of the modern text the interpretive task of defining Shakespeare's writer's motives from within the text itself. The nature of the performative artistic product that is the original play *Othello* is captured in a 'theoretical' performance in the rewritten text.

As a 'reader' of a theatrical production, the audience/reader must rely on the words of the text, therefore ironizing the process of Shakespeare's production itself. Not only do we question the 'integrity' of Manganelli's dramatic voice, but we inevitably are led to accept the essential fictionality of the dramatic play that we associate with Shakespeare. As a formal revision of the original play, as well as the concept of the theatre itself, Manganelli questions – and answers – the essential issues at the root of all writing. His idea of the text, the integrity of the process of text creation and its place in the consciousness of the reader is a contribution that is still valid twenty-four years after his death.

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